

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 17, 2010

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom sent the following letter to President Obama regarding his visit to Indonesia.

March 5, 2010

The President
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Dear President Obama:

On behalf of all the Members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, allow me to wish you a safe and pleasant visit to Indonesia. Though I am sure the press of business will be quite substantial while there, I hope you can find some time to reflect on the experiences you had while living there.

As you prepare for this important trip, we hope you will consider using the visit to Jakarta as a unique opportunity to deliver a major address reaffirming that religious freedom is pivotal to a free and peaceful society. Your visit also offers an opportunity to advance the ideals set forth in your June 4, 2009 Cairo speech, where you said, "People in every country should be free to choose and live their faith based upon the persuasion of the mind and the heart and the soul. This tolerance is essential for religion to thrive, but it is being challenged in many different ways."

We believe it would be important to elaborate further on the subject of the Cairo speech by discussing in greater detail some of the specific challenges or cases of violation you referenced, and offer some ways to address and overcome them in the larger context of the Muslim world. You could also speak of religious freedom, particularly as it relates to the rule of law, its critical element of bilateral relations, and highlight the fact that this issue is a prominent feature of the U.S.-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership.

As you have said, Indonesia is one model of religious tolerance, but the country has not been immune to radicalism and extremism, which has led to terrorist activity, sectarian violence,

religious freedom violations, and other human rights abuses. While Indonesians have rejected extremism at the polls, it often goes unchallenged by many political, civic, and religious leaders.

The government of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has taken positive steps to address terrorism and past sectarian violence, to bring peace to the region of Aceh, and to build popular support for democracy. However, during his presidency, there has also been a troubling number of instances of sectarian violence, the forcible closures of places of worship belonging to religious minorities, the existence of local perda syariah laws restricting the rights of women and some non-Muslims, human rights abuses perpetuated by the military in Papua, and the harassment and arrest of individuals considered religiously “deviant” under Indonesian law. Moreover, various segments of the Indonesian government sometimes tolerate discrimination and abuse of religious minorities by extremist groups.

We hope you will urge Indonesian government leaders to repeal the ministerial decree curtailing the religious activities of the Ahmadiyah community, repeal Article 156 and other local laws in Aceh and elsewhere that infringe on the freedom of religion and expression protected in Indonesia’s Constitution, protect religious and ethnic minorities from violence perpetuated by extremist groups or by the country’s security forces, and prosecute fully those who undertake sectarian violence and human rights abuses. Your experience living in Indonesia and your family connections offer a unique perspective on the challenges faced by the Indonesian people and provide credibility to frankly discuss, in a spirit of friendship and better relations, problems that weaken Indonesia’s democratic foundations and undermine its reputation for religious tolerance and pluralism.

Indonesia, in our estimation, is an ideal place from which you can expand on the ideals set forth in your Cairo speech. In your bilateral discussions with the Indonesian President, you can use the U.S.-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership as a model for the broader Muslim world, in order to develop strategies and policies that expand democracy, prosperity, peace, and the rights of women and religious minorities. We believe that promoting and protecting religious freedom and engaging religious communities are important elements to help further these goals. Robust religious freedom diplomacy, in Indonesia and elsewhere, is intertwined deeply with future U.S. security, economic, and political interests and it is critical to the advancement of democracy.

The late Indonesian President Abdurahim Wahid believed that democracy and stability in the Muslim world needed to be built on the pillars of religious freedom, equal treatment of citizens before the law, and protection of ethnic and religious minorities. Fortunately, there are already many individuals and organizations working in Indonesia to advance these goals. As part of the U.S.-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership, the Administration should consider providing material support and building institutional capacity for those working to promote religious freedom, counter extremism, teach tolerance and human rights, and build interfaith alliances to deal with pressing social, economic, and environmental concerns. We hope the Administration will work with Indonesia’s vibrant civil society, including religious organizations and communities, to advance the goals of peace, justice, and freedom. Developing such partnerships would be important, not only for welfare of the Indonesian people, but as creative models for other parts of the world.

Your visit to Indonesia also provides an opportunity to clarify one element of the Cairo address that has been the subject of some confusion and misunderstanding. Namely, the Cairo speech's emphasis on the importance of dialogue has been taken by some to diminish in importance a rights-based framework for addressing issues of religious freedom as well as related freedoms. We very much doubt that this was intended in light of the United States' longstanding commitment to the Helsinki Accords, affirming that rights concerns are not internal affairs but rather matters of international concern.

Emphasis on universal rights and freedoms should be a central part of a growing relationship with Indonesia and other parts of the Muslim world. Future cooperation and assistance should target concrete improvements in religious freedom and related human rights as well as create new partnerships that will have a profound effect, both within Indonesia and beyond.

We hope your trip is successful in further strengthening U.S.-Indonesia relations.

Sincerely yours,
Leonard Leo
Chair

cc: Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton

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USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.gov, or (202) 523-3257.